

## **Fred Sigrist and the Sigrist Trophy**

This unusual and highly valued trophy reflects another aspect of Thames Sailing Club history, its links with Kingston's aviation history.

Sigrist is Fred Sigrist, who along with Tommy Sopwith and Harry Hawker formed the legendary Hawker aircraft company in 1920. The firm rose from the ashes of its predecessor, Sopwith.

The Sigrist Trophy celebrates the survival of Harry Hawker after the failure of his heroic attempt to become the first airman to cross the Atlantic, non-stop. He and his navigator ditched in mid-ocean, were presumed lost, and then to immense national rejoicing were discovered to have been rescued by a freighter.

The remains of the aircraft, a Sopwith Atlantic, were later recovered and displayed on the top of Selfridges!

The Sigrist Trophy which features an accurate engraving of the aircraft in flight has been awarded for a variety reasons. The trophy was originally a Rater award but was transferred to the Cadet fleet in 1956 and subsequently to the Topper class.

More recently, the trophy was awarded to the winner of a challenge match between Thames Sailing Club and Arun Yacht Club. The first leg of the match was sailed in Raters at Thames in Surbiton and the return leg in Arun's Tempests, sailed in Littlehampton. According to club records the trophy was last won by Thames Sailing Club in 1999 and has not been raced for since. (2017)



**Further Information from the Brooklands Museum Website**

### **'The Sopwith Atlantic**

Hawker's greatest single exploit (with navigator Lt Cdr K F Mackenzie-Grieve), was to enter the Daily Mail's £10,000 competition in 1919 for the first non-stop transatlantic flight. The

chosen 'Sopwith Atlantic' design was based on the war-time B.1 bomber, powered by a single Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engine and incorporated a lifeboat in the upper rear fuselage. First flight was made at Brooklands - almost certainly by Hawker - sometime in February 1919. The machine was then tested thoroughly, even making a 1,800 mile flight in one day to equal the transatlantic trip!

The Sopwith team set off for America with the crated aircraft on 20th March and arrived in St Johns, Newfoundland, for final preparations, eight days later. Setting off on 18th May, Hawker and Grieve then flew continually for 14 hrs 30 mins and 1,050 miles until forced to ditch in bad weather with engine cooling problems two-thirds of the way to England. Fortunately they were rescued by a Danish ship but, as the vessel had no radio, they were officially missing, presumed drowned for nearly a week - until they reached Scotland. Then they received a huge welcome from the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow, before returning to London by train, attracting considerable public attention en route. Both men received a £5,000 consolation prize from the Daily Mail and were awarded the Air Force Cross (Hawker was the first civilian to receive this military decoration). The Sopwith Atlantic's wreckage was exhibited on the roof of Selfridges in London from 2nd June, but its fate is unknown. The elusive first transatlantic flight was finally achieved when the Vimy flown by Alcock and Brown reached Ireland on 15th June'.



### **Frederick Sigrist (1880 - 1956): Millionaire Aviation Pioneer**

'The club's history is not short of colourful personalities, the wealthy or the notable, but there is probably nobody who made the same mark on wider society beyond sailing than Fred Sigrist

Sigrist is remembered in the Sigrist Challenge trophy, which also commemorates a dramatic event in Kingston's aviation history.

In the club Sigrist owned Viva and Caprice in the 20s and 30s, but beyond that he was one of the trio that made first Sopwith, and then Hawker war winners in two world wars, as well as Kingston's major manufacturer. Yet Sigrist's own story is virtually rags to riches.

With little education he was employed by Tommy Sopwith in 1910 as an engineer on his yacht, but was soon helping adapt and design aircraft for Sopwith, then a leading pilot. Alan Branson, Sopwith's biographer, says

Sigrist was a 'natural genius' as a practical engineer. He combined with the talents of Tommy Sopwith and test pilot Harry Hawker to produce world beating aircraft. Branson even suggests it was Sigrist saying he could design a better aircraft than existing early planes that 'sowed the seeds' for forming Sopwith Aviation. After the first war Sopwith went into

liquidation and re-emerged as Hawker. It's difficult to understate the importance of many great Sopwith and then Hawker combat aircraft to Britain in the two wars.

For Sigrist it saw him rise from virtually nothing to a managing director, and a multimillionaire. This was because in 1912, when planes were built in tens at the most, Sigrist was promised £50 for each one built. Then came the Great War, and by 1918 Sopwith had built over 16,000, netting Sigrist something like £800,000!

As a man Branson says Sigrist was a ruthless rough diamond, hard on staff and fond of money, although Sopwith's son says his surface toughness masked a kind heart. Ultimately failing health took him to the Bahamas in 40s.

In TSC Sigrist was also pretty successful, mostly in Viva, with his best year being 1928 when he won both the Queen's Cup and Thames Champion Cup, as well as his own Sigrist Trophy. At other times he won the Yates Cup(4 times) and Braganca Bowl (twice) as well as a variety of other cups in a period dating from 1919 to 1931. He also owned Caprice, but passed it on to his business partner in Hawker, Frank Spriggs.

So what of the Sigrist Trophy? It marks an event, now largely forgotten, that in 1919, was headline news - an attempt to be the first aircraft to fly the Atlantic non-stop. The plane was a Kingston-built two-man Sopwith Atlantic, piloted by Harry Hawker, and part designed by Sigrist.



### **'Atlantic Fate'**

They were unlucky and nearing success when engine failure forced them to ditch. The world believed them dead, but a few days later it was learnt they'd been rescued by a Danish freighter which had no radio.

It triggered huge national rejoicing, decorations for bravery and a parade in London which can be compared with the reception once given to astronauts in the US. The plane's remains were even displayed in Selfridges!

One of Sigrist's responses to the survival of his friend and business partner was the Sigrist Trophy, which includes an accurate engraving of the Sopwith Atlantic - making it a part of both Kingston and aviation history.

Info largely from Alan Branson's excellent biography of Tommy Sopwith - 'Pure Luck'.

Further information about Fred Sigrist From: [www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/sigrist.html](http://www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/sigrist.html)